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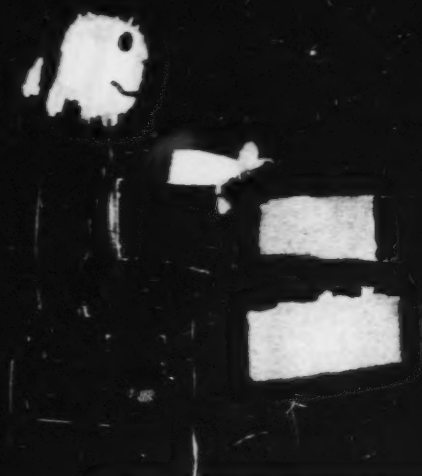
ABSTRACT

This document compiles and classifies research findings on the influences of media violence, particularly its effects on children's and young people's aggression or violent behavior; the review draws on many studies with different theories and methods. The research findings are presented in the following areas: (1) imitation; (2) aggression (including the influence of different kinds of violence); (3) fear; (4) conceptions of violence in reality; (5) habituation; (6) constructive actions; (7) excitement; (8) identity seeking/group belonging; and (9) working through problems, understanding, or knowledge. The review also touches on research that explores media violence through the lenses of other media content, culture at large, and political economy. Based on the review, it was concluded that, looking beyond direct and simple causal relations between media violence and aggression, everyone receives impressions from and is in some way negatively influenced by media violence, although in different ways based on varying motives, intentions, wishes, and life conditions. (Contains 16 notes, some of which reference studies in the review.) (EV)

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Influences of Media Violence

A Brief Research Summary



Cecilia von Fellitzen

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**The Clearinghouse
is located at Nordicom**

Nordicom is an organ of co-operation between the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The overriding goal and purpose is to make the media and communication efforts under-taken in the Nordic countries known, both throughout and far beyond our part of the world.

Nordicom is funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Nordicom uses a variety of channels – newsletters, journals, books, databases – to reach researchers, students, decision-makers, media practitioners, journalists, teachers and interested members of the general public.

Nordicom works to establish and strengthen links between the Nordic research community and colleagues in all parts of the world, both by means of unilateral flows and by linking individual researchers, research groups and institutions.

Nordicom also documents media trends in the Nordic countries. The joint Nordic information addresses users in Europe and further afield. The production of comparative media statistics forms the core of this service.

**The UNESCO International Clearinghouse on
Children and Violence on the Screen**

In 1997, the Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research (Nordicom), Göteborg University, Sweden, began establishment of The UNESCO International Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen, financed by the Swedish government and UNESCO. The overall point of departure for the Clearinghouse's efforts with respect to children and media violence is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The aim of the Clearinghouse is to increase awareness and knowledge about children and media violence, not least in view of the newer channels of communication such as satellite television and Internet, thereby providing a basis for relevant policy-making and contributing to a constructive public debate. Another goal is to point out initiatives aiming to enhance children's competence as users of the media. Moreover, it is hoped that the Clearinghouse's work will stimulate further research on children and the media.

The International Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen informs various groups of users – researchers, policy-makers, media professionals, teachers, voluntary organisations and interested individuals – about

- research on children, young people and media violence,
- children's access to mass media and their media use,
- media literacy and children's participation in the media, and
- regulatory and voluntary measures and activities in the area.

Fundamental to the work of the Clearinghouse is the creation of a global *network*. The Clearinghouse publishes a *yearbook* and a *newsletter*. Several *bibliographies* and a world-wide *register of organisations* concerned with children and media have been compiled. This and other information is available on the Clearinghouse's *web site*:

www.nordicom.gu.se/unesco.html

Influences of Media Violence

A Brief Research Summary

Cecilia von Feilitzen

preface

A new media landscape is emerging. Due to new technology, the supply of media products is becoming increasingly extensive. The boundaries between TV, radio, press, books and telephone are disappearing. Information flows more freely, with fewer and fewer ties to time and space. What we are dealing with is an intense and penetrating media culture.

The changes observable in the media landscape greatly affect children's life circumstances and everyday culture. The media are integrated into children's daily lives and constitute a special cultural dimension of their existence. For many children in the world today, the cultural products experienced are primarily electronically mediated.

What is the state of the content in this expanding media supply? Many adults are convinced that the question of what children and youth watch on TV and film, which books they read and which computer games they play, is not a trivial one. Apprehension is expressed from many sides about the negative effects of the media – not least of television and the new media technologies – on audiences, especially children. Particular attention has been given to violence in the media, which has partly taken on new forms and expressions, e.g., on the Internet and in computer games. But while the media are assumed to cause problems, they are also thought to represent social and cultural resources. One frequent question is whether children are helpless victims in front of the screen or whether they are actually capable of meeting the challenges inherent in today's media supply.

In 1997, Nordicom (Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research at Göteborg University) was commissioned by UNESCO and the Swedish government to establish an international *Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen*. One overarching starting point for Nordicom's efforts to organise such an international information centre is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention asserts children's right to information as well as their right to protection from information that might be detrimental to their development.

In its work on issues of children, youth and media violence, it has been important for the Clearinghouse to broaden and contextualise knowledge in this area. This is why the Clearinghouse has, among other things, devoted yearbooks and newsletters to topics such as media education, the new media technology, and globalisation as well as to regulation and self-regulation. Many different interested parties, however, turn to Nordicom and the Clearinghouse with direct questions on the effects of media violence. Against this background, we at Nordicom are striving to present a more comprehensive picture of what research has to say about such issues.

Since the end of the 1920s, thousands of studies have been conducted on the influences of media violence, especially its influences on children and youth. Many of the research findings would appear to be conflicting. There are, moreover, different types of media violence and different types of influences. In this document, Cecilia von Feilitzen, Scientific Co-ordinator at Nordicom's *International Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen*, has attempted to collect and classify research findings into a more concise form than is perhaps common when reporting on research. We hope that this document will answer some of the questions so often asked by various groups in society.

Göteborg, October 2001

Ulla Carlsson
Director

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Influences of Media Violence

A Brief Research Summary

What does research say about the influences of media violence? Here media violence primarily means depictions of visible, manifest, physical violence (and the threat of it) in moving images, i.e., murders, shooting, fights, etc. This is what research has chiefly focused on – and what is most often referred to in the public debate. We know less about influences of other forms of psychic and structural oppression, and power relations, that are also represented in the media output. Furthermore, research has much more often concerned depictions of violence in entertainment, fiction and drama than in news and other factual contents.

Many persons feel that the research findings on media violence are contradictory. This may be because they want a simple yes- or no-answer to the question of whether media violence leads to increased violence in society – however, research shows that the situation is more complex. It can also depend on the fact that different research studies have different perspectives and questions as starting-points – therefore elucidating different parts of the problems. Nor can any study cover "the whole reality". In addition, different persons get different impressions of media violence – media violence has different kinds of influences. However, the perspectives and findings complement one another, as do pieces in a puzzle.¹

Internet and Video/Computer Games

By way of introduction it should be emphasised that, as regards the new interactive, digital media – Internet and video/computer games – there are still too few studies on the influence of violent depictions to draw any safe conclusions.

The studies on violence on the *Internet* have hitherto principally surveyed the prevalence and availability of extreme violence, violent pornography, hate propaganda, and the like. Some studies point to the fact that – even if such contents only make up a small part of everything that can be found on the Internet – they have increased over time. Other studies in different countries have dealt with the population's, or parents', concern and wish for protection from such contents. A few studies have also tried to discover how many children and young people have run across unwanted

phenomena on the Internet, received solicitations or requests for unwanted activities, or have been threatened via the net. According to one investigation, 25-50 per cent of 10- to 17-year-olds in the US who are surfing regularly had encountered such events, and about a quarter of those who reported these incidents rated themselves as very or extremely upset or afraid as a result of the incident.²

Most of the research on *electronic games* has been performed since the mid-90s and only certain studies have focused on the influence of violent elements. It is not possible to simply generalise the findings on the influence of film and TV violence to that of violence in electronic games, since game playing has more features of interactivity and play and perhaps also implies another kind of identification. Moreover, studies on influences of violence in digital games have used only a limited number of methods and extremely few inquiries have dealt with long-term influence. It should also be stressed that early research in the field can hardly be generalised to the games of today, since games are changing rapidly – they are now much more technologically advanced, and the violent (and other) elements are becoming increasingly realistic.

According to the research, what seems possible to conclude about electronic games and aggression is that small children have become more aggressive in their play following game play – but these few studies have only employed one type of method. Among the few studies treating the influence of newer and more violent electronic games among older children and young people, there are some, above all in the US and Japan, indicating that the games can contribute to aggression. However, there are other studies that do not support or that contradict this last-mentioned conclusion.

Film and Television

In comparison with the studies on video/computer games, research on film and television has been conducted since the late 1920s and three to four thousand studies on influences of violent contents in these media exist in the US alone. Thus, we can base conclusions about the influence of film and TV violence on many studies with different theories and methods, but with findings pointing in the same direction.

At this point it must be stressed that research on children and media has not been performed in all countries. Such research exists mainly in richer

countries such as Australia and New Zealand, Europe (mostly Northern and Western Europe), Japan as well as North America, while in other countries it is more sporadic or non-existent. The knowledge we have about the influences of media violence originates, thus, from only a few countries with specific media situations – and research findings cannot be automatically generalised across borders. In most countries, there is a great need for research on children and media in the changing local and global media landscape. Such research should be carried out both on the countries' own social and cultural terms and through more international comparative investigations.

Traditionally, research on film and TV violence has concentrated on its effects on children's and young people's *aggression* or *violent behaviour*.

Here it should be interposed that the definitions of aggression have not always been explicit. Originally aggression means 'attack'. Certain kinds of aggression can, consequently, be constructive, for example attacking societal evils or defending oneself against oppression. What is referred to in media research – and in the public debate – is, in fact, destructive aggression, for example, attacking or oppressing in order to maintain or strengthen a superior position, something that, accordingly, has not always been made clear. Furthermore, researchers have mostly measured physical aggression, which may entail that they more often find aggression among boys or young people belonging to the working class. Girls and persons belonging to the middle or upper classes might partly express their aggression in other ways, for instance, more often verbally or through individual competition, achievement or self-assertion at the expense of others – thus, manifestations that research measures have more seldom taken into consideration.

The traditional studies on the effects of film and TV violence on children's and young people's aggression or violent behaviour can be said to have generated the following results:

Imitation

There is considerable empirical research showing that portrayals of violent actions can lead to *imitation*, particularly among younger children. Most people who are with small children also notice that they often copy what they see on television or in film. But even if the media contents often activate especially younger children to say, do or play something of what they have seen (or heard or read), these impulses are generally short term

and diminish the older the child becomes. And even if imitation often has a modelling function, e.g., is a process by which you learn things (imitation and play are fundamental factors in the socialisation process; children imitate adults to learn how to behave), it does not mean that children already have internalised or incorporated conceptions, norms and values from the media that have led to an *intentional* aggressive action.

Imitation also sometimes helps in working through one's impressions; at times younger children may need to free themselves from strong media impressions via body language. It is, thus, necessary to consider what aspects of imitation are undesirable – and what aspects might be important for the child in his/her everyday life and social context.

Young people and adults, too, can copy "tips" and instructions about how violence can be committed – tips they can use in a situation of crisis if they feel they need that knowledge. These tips or instructions need not be of use immediately, but can be stored as ideas or 'schemas' for how to act in a violent situation. However, the research does not show that the media are the sole cause of the need for such knowledge, nor of the situation of crisis where the need is felt.

Aggression

The numerous studies focused on *aggression* as a consequence of viewing media violence do not support the notion that media violence is the decisive cause of violence (and violent crimes) in society. Neither do most studies indicate that media violence is of no importance at all.

Media contents seldom have a *direct* or *sole* influence on our *actions*. From the media we definitely get (which is readable in the studies) *mental* impressions – conceptions, feelings, etc. But these are mixed with all other conceptions, norms, values, feelings and experiences we have already acquired and are acquiring from our own practice and from family, school, peers, etc. In general our own experiences, as well as impressions from other persons, are of greater importance than impressions from the media. It is this melting pot of collected impressions that increases or diminishes our disposition to act in a certain way.

The majority of studies on media violence and aggression in the US, as well as some studies in other countries, show that media violence – in this indirect and most often reinforcing way, in interplay with more significant impressions, both in the short and in the long run – *contributes* to

increased aggression for certain individuals under certain circumstances. The longitudinal studies carried out during the last decades, in which the same individuals have been followed for several years, indicate, in sum, that viewing media violence seems to explain 5-10 per cent of children's and young people's increased aggression over time, while 90-95 per cent of the aggression is due to other factors. Such factors include the child's personality and earlier aggression; insecure, tangled or oppressive circumstances in family, school and peer groups; socio-cultural background; unfavourable societal conditions, etc. Included here are also factors such as youth unemployment, alcohol and drugs, access to weapons, ethnic segregation, adults' diminished control, and a consumer-oriented society that stimulates theft and other economic crimes where violence becomes a means.

Several participants in the public debate are "dissatisfied" with these findings and wish instead to make the media the sole scapegoat. Others wave the findings away meaning the opposite – that media violence, consequently, is of no importance. But is 5-10 per cent a negligible result? The fact that many factors interplay is true of most areas in life.

Some studies also point to a reciprocal relation between viewing media violence and aggression – a circle or spiral effect. This implies that children and young people who already are aggressive *both* are attracted by media violence *and* that the viewing of media violence reinforces their aggression.

At the same time, research supports the notion that children who have good relations with their parents, peers, etc., who do not live in a violent surrounding or a violent society, have a safe social background, like school, and are not frustrated or aggressive for some other reason, will most likely not become more aggressive through exposure to media violence.

Different Kinds of Violence

As mentioned earlier, however, it is essential that each country performs its own research – the findings cannot be generalised too hastily.

For example, Japanese research has not found that TV violence contributes to aggression, despite the fact that media violence is extensive in Japan, as well. One reason for this discrepancy might be the different culture in society at large, another the fact that TV violence in Japan is often depicted in other ways than in Western media.³

Research in the US shows that those depictions of violence that with greater probability contribute to aggression include:

- an attractive perpetrator
- violence that stands out as justified (that is, that the viewer finds it in order when, for instance, the hero commits violence when settling accounts with the villain)
- use of weapons
- extensive/graphic violence
- violence that stands out as realistic
- violence that is glorified or rewarded or not punished
- violence where seriously painful or harmful consequences are not shown
- violence portrayed in a humorous way. ⁴

Comparative content analyses in the US and Japan have shown that in Japanese media violence the heroes are often subjected to more violence than the villains, that is, media violence does not as often stand out as justified to the viewer. Likewise media violence in Japan is not as often unpunished and the victim's suffering – the consequences of the violence – is more often depicted, in fact, may even be glorified.

It should be interposed, however, that a few examples of more recent Japanese research on violent electronic games indicate increased aggression in some players.⁵

A British study evinces that some of the above-mentioned kinds of violence in Western media, e.g., violence that stands out as justified, are not experienced as violence by adult viewers; they do not find such scenes violent since they are within the scope of what is customary. What constitutes violence for the adult audience is instead an act that breaks a recognised code of behaviour, for instance, stands out as 'unfair' or 'undeserved'.⁶

How media violence is experienced, however, is not in all respects the same as its influences. As mentioned, it is, among other things, media violence that stands out as 'fair' or justified that increases the likelihood of aggression among certain viewers. Media violence that stands out as unfair may instead lead to uneasiness or dissociation.

Fear

Although for most children, young people or adults media violence does not contribute to aggression or convey useful tips about how violence can be committed, there are several other important types of influences of media violence of which we should be aware.

One such influence is *fear*. Many children and young people like to be a little afraid in an exciting way when they watch fictive films and programmes. And some young people consciously seek out horror films in order to feel the horror. However, several studies show that entertainment violence can also give rise to fear that is stronger than one wished. Murders, shooting, fights, knives, uncanny environments, masks, darkness, horrid sounds, etc., can have an unexpectedly frightening effect. The fear can be reinforced if, among other things, one identifies with the victim of the violence, if one feels that the violence is not justified, if the violence is graphic, or if it is experienced as realistic. Most children and young people say that they at some time, or several times, have been frightened or horror-struck by entertainment violence, not seldom for an extended period.

It is essential to stress in this context that many parents/adults take this kind of fear lightly – but all fear must be worked upon. Repeated fear that is not treated but hidden inwardly will sooner or later manifest itself in some way, not seldom as uncertainty, anxiety, depression – or aggression.

Violence in news and factual programmes can also be frightening. We all become scared now and then by depictions of violence in reality. This is necessary; we have to be shocked sometimes by such representations of violence. Fear is a biological gift, something positive, a means of survival, of sheltering ourselves and counteracting dangers and societal evils. But it is obviously undesirable if our angst becomes so strong that our inclination to act is blocked.

Research from some countries shows that children *more often* mention violence in fiction films and programmes as frightening. This is related, among other things, to the fact that we become more frightened if the violence associates to our own experience and if it offers possibilities for identification. For children news does not offer possibilities of identification as often as fiction. Much of what is shown in news and other factual material is at a geographical, cultural and psychological distance from the child's everyday life. But *when* children identify with or experience a violent situation in news/factual programmes, *when* they feel that this can happen here or to me – then media violence about reality is *more* frightening. So even if entertainment violence more often gives rise to fear, depictions of real violence frighten, when they are frightening, more *intensively*. This is because you cannot brush away (portrayals of) actual violence, persuade yourself that it is only make-believe, as you can entertainment violence.

Conceptions of Violence in Reality

There are also indications that media violence provides erroneous *conceptions of the violence in reality*. Research on this kind of influence of media violence is sparser, however.

Certain studies indicate, for example, that children, because of having viewed action films, believe that bodies are stronger than they actually are, and that the children cannot foresee or understand how serious the consequences of kicks and blows can be.

Other results indicate that, due to too much TV viewing, the audience can get exaggerated ideas about the amount and type of violence in society.⁷ Media violence can, thus, convey or reinforce ideas that there are more violent persons and more violence out there than is actually the case. Such erroneous conceptions can, in turn, give rise to fear within the viewer of personal encounters with violence – when riding the underground, walking in parks, and so on – as well as to a pessimistic view that one cannot trust other people.

Not only fictive violence but also news violence can influence the conceptions of violence in reality. Press and TV news often exaggerate how violent the violence is. There are, as well, research examples of how erroneous ideas of the violence in society – underpinned by the media – have led to moral panic in the audience and calls for more law and order.

Conceptions – Fear – Tips about Violence

Several different theories have been presented concerning how human aggression *generally* arises. The research on *imitation* and *aggression* as a consequence of viewing *media violence* has often emanated from various kinds of social learning theory (e.g., that we learn attitudes and behaviours from media violence via observation; or that media violence activates similar aggressive thoughts, norms, values and actions within us; or that it contributes to cognitive schemas for how we can or should act in a violent situation).⁸ Some researchers also mean that the likelihood of such learning is greater if we already are frustrated.

Moreover, it is probable that among a minority of individuals it is, precisely, *erroneous conceptions of the violence in reality, the fear to meet with it oneself, the experience of threat in the surroundings and ideas of how one can commit violence* – phenomena that, thus, the media violence has contributed to – that in situations of crisis can pave the way for destructive *aggression*.

Habituation

A further kind of influence that some studies have dealt with is emotional and cognitive *habituation*, that is, decreased excitement, decreased fear, lowered inhibitions in response to violence. Certain US studies indicate that media violence can make us more desensitised to or unconcerned about real violence. Studies from, for instance, Europe and Australia have not shown this, but there inquiries about this type of influence are quite few. However, studies show clearly that we become habituated to media violence itself. Young people even say so themselves. Much viewing of media violence leads, accordingly, to decreased excitement in response to or decreased fear of media violence, such that the threshold of tolerance is raised. Some people therewith seek other kinds of, and stronger, excitement and violence from the media. And since the media are competing for the audience, they spice the films, programmes, etc., with more violence.

Constructive Actions

It is highly likely that certain media violence also has positive influences. Dramatised and realistically depicted media violence *ought to*, e.g., give the audience insight into the real causes and consequences of violence and power in society, thereby contributing to *realistic conceptions, democratic norms and values* and *constructive actions*. There are also, as mentioned,

situations when *fear* – and even *aggression* – can be something constructive, for example, if it helps us to avoid real dangers or dissociate ourselves from and fight against abuse of power. However, research focused on this issue has not been found.

Excitement

On the other hand, there is research that does not proceed from the perspective of influence – as does that hitherto mentioned – by asking what media violence is doing to the individual, but that instead has the child's, the young person's or the adult's perspective as starting-point. The question becomes, simply stated: What are the children, young people, etc., doing with the media violence? Such research builds on the fact that different persons generally experience excitement, violence, horror and power – and other media contents – very differently, need it to different extents and give it different meanings. It is important to understand the fascination that many persons (but certainly not everybody) feel for media violence. Some violent portrayals of today also have their roots in historical myths, folk-tales and ancient drama.

Let us give some examples of what this empirical research has arrived at. Several studies show that media violence for some persons means precisely *excitement* (or a little fear or "wishful fear" – excitement and fear are extremes along the same dimension). Violence, hatred and death – and power, glory and money – are, as love, phenomena essential to human beings and therefore often exciting. They often have a dramatic value in themselves, something that appeals to different audiences' preferences and needs. The reason for watching action violence or horror films can, for instance, be as simple as feeling that everyday life is boring and wanting a kick or stimulation. Some people are also more excitement seeking than others. For certain persons, excitement can instead serve to divert or calm their own uneasiness and somewhat relieve feelings of dissatisfaction or powerlessness.

Identity Seeking, Group Belonging

The signs and symbols of popular culture are also important constituents of children's and young people's everyday practice and learning processes – in play and identity work, development of lifestyles, group belonging and social action. Media violence, as well, can sometimes and in different ways play a role for *identity seeking* and *feeling of group belonging*.

Among other things, interviews with 15- to 16-year-olds show that watching certain selected violence and horror genres can be a way of measuring toughness, a test of manliness in the gang, as well as one of several expressions of a lifestyle that unites the group, and a counter-cultural protest action against an adult world that, from the young people's viewpoint, is oppressing or indifferent. This is with greater probability true of those young people whose identity is not strengthened in school and whose low marks are a sign of competence and creativity that is being wasted.⁹

Young men's interest in video/computer games has been interpreted in a similar manner. Young boys live in a subordinate and powerless societal situation. Playing violent electronic games signifies exercising resistance, giving expression to one's masculinity, creating power and gaining control – on a symbolic level. Recent empirical studies also show that what the players themselves find most fascinating with these games is not the violence *per se* but the challenge, that is, learning to master and advance in the game, managing difficult situations, solving problems and competing. Essential is, as well, the excitement and immersion in the game. However, the violence in the games has been shown to be a motivating factor as well, above all for boys.

Other examples of the meanings of media violence for identity seeking and group belonging are the following: Viewing horror films has, for instance, been shown to fit into the socialisation of gender roles. Young men have an opportunity to show that they are not scared – something expected of men – whereas girls can express their fear, lean against the boys to get protection, and admire them for their bravery – something expected of women.¹⁰ And among teenage boys, the competent interpreters of action films – those who are acquainted with the conventions and narrative structures of the films – maintain or create, through on-line commentary while viewing, their positions and relations in the group.¹¹

Working through Problems, Understanding, Knowledge

As previously mentioned, many studies show that people who are already aggressive have a tendency to be attracted to media violence. This can also be valid for certain children who, e.g., have experienced violence at home, in war, or other contexts. One of several possible explanations is that some persons use media portrayals trying to *work through and understand* their situation, as well as factors that have contributed to the aggressive environment, or to the fact that they feel angst, are oppressed, frustrated or aggressive.

The motives for using media violence can be more or less unconscious. Research from Argentina suggests, for instance, that children who experience family conflict, or other social or individual conflicts, seek out and integrate violent elements from television to compensate for these conflicts and their subjectively felt insufficiency. This may mean that these children feel a kind of temporary relief – though they have not for this reason solved their conflicts in the long run. It is equally likely that viewing media violence reinforces their aggression.¹²

Neither does the research support the idea that catharsis (Greek: purification) is a decisive influence of media violence, in the sense that one generally becomes released from one's earlier aggression by means of the symbolic vicarious experiences of media violence.

The motives for watching media violence can be more conscious and intentional, as well. Two Scandinavian studies with juvenile delinquents show that these young people, depending on group belonging and lifestyle, seek out particular violent genres and view these specific programmes or films repeatedly.¹³ It is not the case that chiefly the films or programmes make these young people violent – as said previously, other factors are more decisive for aggression and crime – but their life situations imply the desire to *learn special actions* in order to master a possible violent situation, for example, if they are threatened by another gang. Thus, for them this is a question of competence development and survival, just as other people, e.g., need to read books for their work or to relax to soft music after a stressful day. These two studies also give examples of how persons can copy instructions from violent depictions in the media (cf. under the heading "Imitation").

Summary of the Influences of Media Violence

Looking beyond direct and simple causal relations between media violence and aggression, one understands that we all get impressions from and are influenced by media violence – but in different ways based on our varying motives, intentions, wishes and life conditions. From the mentioned examples of undesired influences – imitation, aggression, fear, erroneous conceptions and habituation – one also understands that we all, in one way or another, are negatively influenced by media violence.

Clearly, research on media violence has not only dealt with different kinds of influences – it also derives from different theoretical perspectives. Like other research within the social sciences and the humanities, the perspectives have, among other things, their origin in the basic philosophic question of a human being's free will. To what extent are we products of the environment – of parents, school, peers, media, religion, culture and social structure – and to what extent do we choose and act independently? Although most people agree that the truth lies somewhere in between, some of us put more emphasis on the structural perspective and others on the agency perspective. The same applies to researchers. Some therefore elucidate how we are *influenced* by the media violence (in interplay with the rest of the environment). Others focus instead on how we (based on different motives and interests) *choose, use* and *interpret* media violence in order to orient ourselves in the surroundings and try to improve our situation.

These perspectives, however, are not contradictory. They only have different locations on the theoretical map. Nor are the findings from the studies contradictory. The same persons can appreciate and construct meaning from media violence while also getting less desirable impressions from it. The fact that we both are influenced by and seek to influence the environment is true of most contexts.

Other Media Contents

There are also other research perspectives on media violence. For example, some researchers have asked whether it is necessarily the violence in the programmes or films that contributes to aggression among some viewers.

The theory of 'emotional arousal', supported by empirical studies with adults, points to the possibility that any media content that is exciting or inspires strong feelings reinforces the mood the viewer takes to the viewing situation (aggression, depression, erotic disposition, and so on). The viewing may, thus, in the short run mean more intensive action corresponding to that very mood.¹⁴

Another assumption with empirical support is that sustained viewing of very fast pace programmes contributes to aggressive and uneasy behaviour (hyperactivity) among young children.¹⁵

A third hypothesis is that large parts of the entertainment and fiction output as a whole, as well as advertising, contribute to increased expectations of a more glamorous lifestyle – expectations that cannot be fulfilled for all groups due to their relative deprivation in society. The result may be frustration, which in its turn can cause aggression. Such a possible media influence is reinforced by societal development based on steadily increasing expectations, that is, development emphasising increased production, increased consumption, achievement, and individual competition, in spite of the fact that different groups have different economic, social and cultural possibilities of realising such goals.

Culture at Large

Another perspective within media violence research starts neither from influence of the depictions of manifest, physical violence (or other specific media contents) nor from the individual as an agent, but focuses instead on the culture and media output at large. Such studies concern, among other things, values and myths, power and dominance relations, and different kinds of structural, latent or psychic violence in the culture, as well as the representations and consequences of these cultural expressions.

To take one of many examples: Findings from content analyses all over the world show that certain population groups – children, elderly, women, ethnic minority groups and persons with low-wage occupations – are underrepresented in the media output, while other groups – men, the middle and upper classes, and the majority population – are overrepresented. A common interpretation is that the underrepresented groups, who are also mostly portrayed in prejudiced and stereotyped manners, have lower status in society generally and that the culture, of which the media constitute a larger and larger part, in this way reflects the power hierarchy in society. The fact that children, for instance, are greatly underrepresented in the media output can, thus, be regarded as the media expressing and exerting a form of symbolic violence towards or cultural oppression of children.

Another example of this cultural research perspective is international, comparative content analyses showing that violent portrayals, and with these also norms and values, are different in different cultures (cf. American and Japanese media violence under the heading "Different Kinds of Violence").

Political Economy

However, cultural or symbolic violence does not only have different meanings in different nations and epochs, and different ways of glorifying and condemning violence do not only depend on different cultures, but also on economy, technology, politics and power groupings in society. Still another perspective in media violence research is focused on precisely this, namely how media violence and the values and power relations that are expressed in culture are due to the media institutions' owner-situation, policies, economy and technology, which are in turn closely integrated with economy, power and politics in society at large. Political economic factors in society and media are, thus, regarded as decisive for what is conveyed and not conveyed in the media output – and in extension also for the influences of media contents, including media violence. For instance, empirical analyses show that national foreign politics and trade, as well as the media industry's anchorage in other companies that produce weapons, space technology, telecommunications, cars, food, etc., have an influence on what we can view, hear and read about. The companies that advertise in and sponsor the media also affect what is transmitted, since they encourage contents that attract the largest audience. Increasingly often, series are produced with accompanying toys, other gadgets, clothes, etc., and the same media content can be found in television, films, computer games, comics, and so on. The entertainment industry, including media violence, has an important economic function for society as a whole.

With ever more TV channels, electronic games, Internet sites, etc., the violent elements in the total media output are increasing. This is not only because violent depictions are accumulating with the establishment of new media, but also because of technological development, media competition and the globalisation and privatisation of the media. A large part of the media market is dominated by a few trans-national conglomerates that convey the same media contents to larger and larger audiences in the world. With media contents flowing across borders, the possibilities for single countries to regulate the media diminish. Moreover, the media contents become more and more easily available due to greater numbers of apparatuses in the homes and the digital media convergence (for example the fact that games, newspapers, magazines, books, radio, music, film and television to an increasing extent now also exist on the Internet).

At the same time, research studies show that people on average prefer to watch TV programmes without violence. Neither do most children and young people prefer violence in programmes and films, and, as mentioned,

it is not primarily the violence that fascinates young people with video/ computer games. Studies also show that people as a rule prefer to watch home-produced drama programmes, that is, soap operas and other fiction produced in one's own country or in one's own language. However, in most countries such domestically dramatised alternatives are few or lacking, since they are expensive to produce and do not repay themselves through sale to other countries, which is the case in, for instance, the US, which dominates world exports.

It is, consequently, not primarily popularity with the viewers/media users that is the driving force behind media violence, but economic and global forces including marketing. Media products that are to be sold to as many cultures as possible need a dramatic ingredient that does not require adaptation, but that "speaks action" in any language. That ingredient is often violence.¹⁶

Notes

1. Because of the summarising character of this article and the great amount of research in the area, references to single investigations are only made in a few cases. The interested reader is referred to more detailed reviews and original studies, some of which are mentioned in the box after the article.
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7. These investigations were initiated by George Gerbner and colleagues in the US and have been repeated in several other countries – sometimes but not always with the same results.

8. See, for example, Wartella, Ellen, Olivarez, Adriana & Jennings, Nancy (1998) "Children and Television Violence in the United States", in U. Carlsson & C. von Feilitzen (eds.) *Children and Media Violence*. Yearbook from the UNESCO International Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen at Nordicom, Göteborg University, p. 55-62.
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NORDICOM's Literature Data Base, NCOM, <http://www.nordicom.gu.se> (Nordic research)

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